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## **'Israeli Idol' Diana Golbi brings act and message to US**

By JTA  
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Star performs short set of songs in New York on behalf of ELEM, a nonprofit organization that assists "distressed youth" in Israel.

NEW YORK - For her first visit to New York and the United States, Diana Golbi adopted the unofficial uniform of most city dwellers - head-to-toe black. Black shirt, black top and tight black jeans. Her long brown hair was straight and hung past her shoulders.

Pointing to her stiletto heels, which added at least four inches to her diminutive stature, she explained, "I'm in New York, so I have to be feminine." She drew out the "f" sound as though she found the very concept of femininity distasteful. Or perhaps Golbi was merely playing with her English, a third language after her native tongues, Russian and Hebrew.

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Golbi, 19, and the winner of the 2010 season of "Kochav Nolad" - the Israeli incarnation of "American Idol" - had just performed a short set of songs at City Winery on behalf of ELEM, a nonprofit organization that assists and rehabilitates "distressed youth" in Israel with programs ranging from counseling and social services to vocation and job training. She herself had benefited from the two-decades-old organization's services as a teenager wandering the streets late at night in Holon.

Since winning the competition, the Russian-born Golbi has become something of an ambassador for ELEM, which runs programs in 28 cities across Israel. They include the night vans that she and her friends discovered driving around Holon, a low-income suburb of Tel Aviv.

Like many immigrants and children of immigrants, Golbi found it difficult to transition into the mainstream of Israeli society. The alienation and depression were exacerbated following the death of a friend, who died of a drug overdose. It was around this time that Golbi was introduced by some of her friends to ELEM and its night vans.

"I had a lot of friends who spoke constantly about ELEM, so I came there with my friends and saw how they deal with their problems," she recalled. "I had my own problems, and I found people who I can trust and talk to."

"Problems" was about as much as Golbi was willing to divulge. Asked for the specific nature of her issues, Golbi politely demurred, referring to it as "the past."

It was an ELEM social worker who spotted her nascent artistic talent and helped get the young Golbi into a theater program. The rest is (televised) history.

Owing to her experience performing for an audience of thousands on live television week after week, Golbi despite her youth took the stage of her first US show with such aplomb. She played the guitar only on her first song, relying on the backing of her band for the rest.

Golbi let her rasp-tinged rock vocals do all the work, especially on "Little Children" ("Yeladim Ketanim"), which she also performed during the singing competition. The composition, which is all inspirational power cords, is something of an anthem to children-centered nonprofits with its emphasis on the strength of the young.

Asked who are her favorite musical artists, she at first seemed annoyed.

"I hate that question," Golbi said, but eventually answered if not with an artist at least with a genre. "Glam rock," she said, "and old stuff."

She acknowledged that her music style has shifted as she has gotten older. In high school with her former band, HaRusim (The Russians or The Ruined Ones).

"We did metal music and we were screaming all over the place," she said.

If her City Winery set is any indication, Golbi has veered into a more commercial Top 40 pop/rock sound. That, too, is subject to change.

"I'm 19. When I'm 30 ...," she said, shrugging.

This sort of artistic flux is certainly understandable in one as young as Golbi. After all, if she were an American of the same age she'd be in college, changing her major for the umpteenth time.

Instead, Golbi is now serving in the Israeli military. In fact, she was on loan for the night; the Israeli army had given her special permission to travel to New York and perform at the gala.

Golbi ended her set with an English song, the endlessly covered "Hallelujah." The Leonard Cohen song works in nearly any context - an animated feature film ("Shrek"), the "American Idol" stage or a room full of Jews who had just opened their checkbooks to help underserved and underprivileged Israeli youth.

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